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RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE PRIORITY 0850
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI PRIORITY 6086
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 004426

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SUBJECT: NAGANO GOVERNOR RACE GOES TO POSTAL REBEL

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reason: 1.4 (b)(d).

¶1. (U) Summary. Jin Murai, a former ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Lower House member, defeated independent incumbent Yasuo Tanaka on August 6, in a Nagano Prefecture gubernatorial contest that was seen as more a test of Tanaka's poor leadership than any sort of wider referendum on national politics. Murai, a "postal rebel" who resigned from the LDP and the Diet in 2005 to protest his party's postal privatization plans, received support from the LDP prefectural organization, but none from the national organization. End summary.

¶2. (U) Jin Murai, 69, a former Lower House Diet member and one-time State Minister for National Disaster Prevention, defeated two-term incumbent Yasuo Tanaka, 50, a harsh critic of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, with 53 percent of the vote in the Nagano Prefecture gubernatorial election on August 6. Murai, a "postal rebel" who resigned from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in October 2005 to protest Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's plan to privatize Japan's postal system, ran with the backing of the prefectural-level organizations of the LDP and coalition partner New Komeito, but no real support from the LDP's national office. Tanaka, who was elected twice as an independent, received de facto support from the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) during the hard-fought campaign. Officially, however, both candidates ran as independents.

¶3. (C) Ultimately, the vote appears to have had little to do with political parties and much more to do with Tanaka's performance as Governor during his six years in office. Tanaka's opposition to dam construction and other public works projects had put him at odds with the prefectural assembly and other local politicians and rendered him largely ineffective. In the words of one Embassy LDP contact, Tanaka was defeated simply because he could not carry through on his reform agenda. He suggested that Tanaka may have benefited in earlier elections from the general enthusiasm for reform generated by PM Koizumi, but was hampered this time by the lack of results. Voters were also said to dislike Tanaka's top-down governing style. Press reports cited his failure to garner support from the local branch of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, a key supporter for most DPJ candidates, as another reason for his defeat. General voter dissatisfaction was apparent from the turnout, down more than 12 percentage points from Tanaka's landslide victory in 2002.

14. (C) Murai, for his part, offered little in the way of policy proposals, although he did pledge during the campaign not to reverse the fiscal reforms undertaken by his predecessor. Instead, he relied on promises to improve communication with constituents and politicians and rely more on a consensus-building approach to governance. According to a press contact in Nagano, Murai's willingness to reach out to members of the prefectural assembly and local mayors was an important element of his success. While this approach has led to some concerns of backsliding on reforms, our contact believes there are enough reformers in the prefectural assembly to preserve the balance toward a more progressive agenda.

15. (C) Comment. News reports on August 7 quoted LDP Secretary General Tsutomu Takebe as saying that the LDP

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deliberately refrained from endorsing Murai to give him an edge with DPJ supporters and other swing voters. We have heard similar statements from LDP insiders over the past few weeks, along with concerns that Tanaka's reelection would have given additional momentum to the DPJ, after recent victories in elections in Shiga and Chiba prefectures. While the LDP's strategy appears to have been effective in Nagano, it does not necessarily bode well for the LDP's ability to win over DPJ supporters and swing voters in next year's Upper House elections. Nevertheless, an LDP contact in the Lower House told the Embassy today that the LDP is happy that Tanaka's defeat removes one of Koizumi's most vocal critics. The contact reiterated that local politics are distinct from national level politics and he did not see this election in Nagano as having any effect on next year's Upper House elections.

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SCHIEFFER